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The Paradox of Conscious Consumption: A Cross-Generational Analysis of Attitudes vs. Behaviour in Sustainable Luxury Fashion

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ABSTRACT: Despite growing consumer awareness of sustainability in fashion, a persistent gap remains between positive attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour, particularly in the luxury segment. This study examines the paradox of conscious consumption in sustainable luxury fashion through a cross-generational lens, comparing Generation Z and Late Baby Boomers. A quantitative approach was adopted using a structured questionnaire administered to 150 respondents. Statistical analyses, including the Mann-Whitney U test, the Chi-square test, the Spearman correlation, and binary logistic regression, were employed to test four hypotheses. Findings confirm that Gen Z holds significantly more positive attitudes toward sustainable luxury and demonstrates higher actual purchase rates compared to Late Baby Boomers. However, a clear attitude-behaviour gap persists across both groups, moderated primarily by perceived price. Attitudes positively predict purchase behaviour, but only moderately (Spearman $\rho = 0.314$), while perceived expense significantly reduces the likelihood of choosing sustainable luxury ($B = -0.682$, $p = 0.001$). The study contributes to sustainable consumption theory, luxury marketing, and generational cohort research within an emerging market context.

KEYWORDS: *Sustainable Luxury Fashion, Conscious Consumption, Attitude-Behaviour Gap, Generation Z, Price Sensitivity, Cross-Generational Analysis, Emerging Markets*

I. INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade, driven by growing environmental concerns, heightened ethical awareness, and increasing scrutiny of production practices. Issues such as climate change, carbon emissions, water pollution, labour exploitation, and textile waste have become central to public discourse, compelling consumers and brands alike to reconsider conventional consumption patterns.

Simultaneously, the luxury fashion segment has experienced steady growth, driven not merely by functional value but by exclusivity, status signalling, craftsmanship, and emotional resonance. This convergence of sustainability and luxury presents a compelling paradox: luxury is traditionally associated with excess and indulgence, while sustainability emphasises responsibility and restraint. However, luxury goods also embody durability, timeless design, and longevity—attributes that conceptually align with sustainable consumption ideals.

Despite increasing visibility of sustainability initiatives, a notable disconnect persists between consumer attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour—widely termed the attitude-behaviour gap. Luxury consumption is deeply intertwined with symbolic meanings, including identity construction and social status, which can override ethical considerations. Generational differences add further complexity: younger cohorts such as Generation Z are frequently characterised as values-driven and environmentally aware, yet empirical research questions whether these attitudes consistently translate into purchasing behaviour, particularly in high-priced product categories.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the paradox of conscious consumption in sustainable luxury fashion across two generational cohorts—Generation Z (aged 18–28) and Late Baby Boomers (aged 46–59)—to investigate whether sustainability is genuinely influencing consumer decision-making or remains largely symbolic.



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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sustainable Consumption and the Attitude–Behaviour Gap

Sustainable consumption research consistently highlights a gap between positive environmental attitudes and actual pro-environmental behaviour (Carrington et al., 2014; White et al., 2019). Social desirability bias inflates self-reported sustainability intentions, habitual consumption patterns override ethical concerns, and price sensitivity remains a major barrier to ethical purchasing (Young et al., 2010). Cognitive dissonance further explains how consumers rationalise unsustainable choices while maintaining sustainability-oriented self-images.

2.2 Luxury Consumption and Symbolic Value

Luxury consumption is strongly associated with status signalling, identity construction, and emotional attachment (Han et al., 2010). Brand heritage and craftsmanship contribute to perceived authenticity, while exclusivity enhances desirability. Consumers often associate luxury with quality and durability, indirectly aligning it with sustainability—though the desire for prestige can take precedence over ethical considerations (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014).

2.3 Sustainable Luxury Fashion

Sustainable luxury integrates ethical sourcing with premium positioning. Transparency and traceability enhance consumer trust, while greenwashing concerns reduce credibility (Davies et al., 2012). Willingness to pay for sustainable luxury depends on perceived authenticity, and sustainability may enhance brand equity without necessarily driving immediate sales (Joergens, 2006). In emerging markets, affordability and perceived value remain critical determinants of sustainable luxury purchase intention (Kumar et al., 2023).

2.4 Generational Differences

Generation Z demonstrates high sustainability awareness but also high price sensitivity. Millennials exhibit strong pro-environmental attitudes but inconsistent behaviour. Baby Boomers prioritise quality and longevity, sometimes engaging in implicitly sustainable behaviour (Jung & Jin, 2022). Cross-generational research reveals that values, life stage, and income significantly affect sustainable purchasing decisions. Importantly, generational identity influences attitudes but does not guarantee behavioural alignment.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in five theoretical frameworks. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) posits that behaviour is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control—helping explain why positive sustainability attitudes do not always produce purchase behaviour when constraints such as high prices or limited availability exist. The Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) Theory illuminates how personal values shape environmental beliefs and activate moral norms guiding pro-environmental behaviour. Signalling Theory is particularly relevant in luxury contexts, where products signal both status and, increasingly, moral responsibility. Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains how consumers rationalise inconsistencies between values and actions. Finally, Generational Cohort Theory provides the framework for analysing how shared socio-historical experiences shape consumption patterns across age groups.

IV. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Primary data were collected via a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms, yielding 150 usable responses. The sample comprised Generation Z respondents (n = 107, 71.3%) and Late Baby Boomers (n = 43, 28.7%). All participants had purchased apparel in the prior 12 months and were familiar with luxury fashion brands. The sample included 56.7% female, 39.3% male, and 4.0% preferring not to state gender; 48.7% reported monthly income between ₹50,000–₹150,000.

4.2 Instrument

The questionnaire captured: (a) Sustainability Attitudes – five Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) combined into a composite Attitude Score (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$); (b) Purchase Behaviour – whether respondents had purchased sustainable luxury apparel in the past 12 months and their product choice when a sustainable option costs more; (c) Key Factors – perceived expense and trust in sustainability claims.



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4.3 Hypotheses

- H1: Gen Z exhibits significantly higher positive attitudes toward sustainable luxury apparel compared to Late Boomers.
 H2: There is a significant difference in actual purchase behaviour between Gen Z and Late Boomers.
 H3: Positive attitudes are positively and significantly associated with actual purchase behaviour.
 H4: Perceived expense has a significant negative influence on consumers' choice of sustainable luxury when priced higher.

4.4 Analysis

Non-normality of the Attitude Score was confirmed via the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.955$, $p = 0.000$). Accordingly, the Mann-Whitney U test compared group attitudes, Chi-square tests examined categorical behaviour differences, Spearman correlation assessed the attitude-behaviour relationship, and binary logistic regression identified predictors of purchase behaviour and product choice.

V. RESULTS

Table 1: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

H	Test	Statistic	p	Result
H1	Mann-Whitney U	U = 4203.5	0.000	Supported
H2	Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 8.47$	0.004	Supported
H3	Spearman + Logistic Reg.	$\rho = 0.314$; B = 1.248	0.000	Supported
H4	Chi-Square + Logistic Reg.	$\chi^2 = 12.36$; B = -0.682	0.001	Supported

5.1 H1: Generational Differences in Attitudes

Gen Z respondents recorded a substantially higher mean Attitude Score (3.61, SD = 0.38) compared to Late Boomers (2.74, SD = 0.31). The Mann-Whitney U test confirmed this difference was highly significant ($U = 4203.5$, $p < 0.001$), with Gen Z's mean rank (92.3) far exceeding that of Late Boomers (32.7). H1 is supported: younger consumers hold significantly more positive attitudes toward sustainable luxury fashion.

5.2 H2: Generational Differences in Purchase Behaviour

Among Gen Z respondents, 49.1% had purchased sustainable luxury apparel in the past 12 months, compared to only 22.5% of Late Boomers. The Chi-square test confirmed a statistically significant association between generation and purchase behaviour ($\chi^2 = 8.47$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.004$). H2 is supported; however, fewer than half of Gen Z respondents had actually made a sustainable purchase, foreshadowing the attitude-behaviour paradox.

5.3 H3: Attitude-Behaviour Relationship

Spearman correlation revealed a moderate positive relationship between Attitude Score and purchase behaviour ($\rho = 0.314$, $p < 0.001$). Binary logistic regression controlling for generation confirmed attitudes as a significant predictor (B = 1.248, $\text{Exp}(B) = 3.484$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that each unit increase in Attitude Score approximately tripled the odds of purchase. The model explained 18.4–24.7% of variance in purchase behaviour (Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.184$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.247$). H3 is supported, though moderate effect sizes underscore the persistence of the attitude-behaviour gap.

5.4 H4: Effect of Perceived Expense



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Respondents who agreed that sustainable luxury is too expensive were significantly more likely to choose regular luxury when faced with a price premium ($\chi^2 = 12.36, p < 0.001$). Logistic regression confirmed perceived expense as a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.682, \text{Exp}(B) = 0.506, p = 0.001$), reducing the odds of choosing sustainable luxury by approximately 49% per unit increase in perceived expense. Attitude Score remained a positive predictor ($B = 0.935, p = 0.001$), while generation was non-significant once price perception was controlled. H4 is supported.

VI. DISCUSSION

All four hypotheses were supported, offering coherent empirical evidence for the conscious consumption paradox. Consistent with Generational Cohort Theory, Gen Z exhibited both stronger sustainability attitudes and higher purchase rates. However, even within this cohort, barely half made sustainable luxury purchases—a finding that challenges the popular narrative of Gen Z as reliably sustainability-driven consumers.

The moderate attitude–behaviour correlation (Spearman $\rho = 0.314$) aligns with the broader literature (Carrington et al., 2014; White et al., 2019) and extends it to the luxury context, where symbolic value and aspirational consumption create additional complexity. The TPB’s emphasis on perceived behavioural control is clearly supported: even strong pro-sustainability attitudes are overridden when price is perceived as prohibitive.

The role of perceived expense as the dominant barrier—reducing the odds of sustainable choice by ~49%—has particular significance in the Indian emerging market context. Unlike Western markets with higher disposable income and established sustainable luxury infrastructure, Indian consumers face more pronounced affordability constraints, amplifying the attitude–behaviour gap. This finding enriches existing theory by positioning price not merely as a control variable but as a central moderator of the attitude–behaviour relationship in high-involvement, high-cost categories.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Theoretical

This study advances theory by situating the attitude–behaviour gap within the sustainable luxury context, integrating sustainable consumption, luxury marketing, and generational cohort perspectives. It demonstrates that the gap is not solely psychological but is structurally embedded—shaped by economic constraints that disproportionately affect emerging market consumers. Future theoretical models of sustainable luxury consumption should explicitly incorporate perceived affordability as a central construct.

7.2 Managerial

Luxury brands must move beyond symbolic sustainability messaging. Key recommendations include: (1) developing entry-level sustainable lines or modular collections to reduce price barriers; (2) investing in transparent, verifiable sustainability communication—third-party certifications, traceability, and supply chain disclosures—to address Gen Z scepticism about greenwashing; (3) employing value-based pricing narratives that emphasise cost-per-wear and durability; (4) tailoring communications by cohort—identity and social impact messaging for Gen Z; quality and longevity narratives for Baby Boomers; and (5) creating experiential engagement initiatives to deepen emotional connection with sustainability.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. The sample was convenience-based and skewed toward Gen Z (71.3%), limiting generalisability. All data are self-reported and thus subject to social desirability bias. Only two generational cohorts were examined, excluding Millennials and Generation X. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and longitudinal tracking of attitudinal change.

Future research should employ larger, more balanced samples across all generational cohorts and include respondents from tier-2 and tier-3 Indian cities to capture diverse socio-economic contexts. Longitudinal designs would enable tracking of whether positive attitudes eventually produce behavioural change. Experimental designs manipulating price levels, sustainability claims, and brand transparency would establish cleaner causal relationships. Advanced techniques such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) could examine complex interactions among psychological variables,



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perceived risk, brand loyalty, and social influence. Comparative studies across emerging and developed markets would further illuminate how cultural and economic contexts shape the manifestation of the attitude–behaviour gap.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study confirms the paradox of conscious consumption in sustainable luxury fashion. While sustainability has become an important consideration in consumer attitudes—particularly among Generation Z—it does not consistently translate into purchasing behaviour. The attitude–behaviour gap is real, persistent, and significantly moderated by perceived price. Bridging this gap requires a holistic strategy that combines authentic sustainability credentials, accessible pricing, and targeted communication. Sustainable luxury will achieve broader adoption only when it is not merely desirable but also perceived as attainable.

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